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THREE GENERATIONS OF CHINESE VIDEO ART

WINDS OF CHANGE: THE EMERGENCE OF VIDEO ART IN CHINA

Less than ten years separate the birth of the avant garde in China from the first Chinese video work.

In 1979, a group of young, self-taught artists known as 'The Stars' staged a demonstration at Tiananmen Square, demanding greater artistic freedoms. Following their protest they held an impromptu exhibition on the outside gates of the National Art Museum of China, showing abstract painting, bucolic landscapes and ironic sculptures – art that boldly departed from the social realism that had defined art in China for more than 30 years. The event announced a liberation of Chinese expression, fresh winds of change and a dynamic challenge to the establishment. The show was quickly shut down by the authorities, but not before the claims it had made on the significance and demands of art had declared the birth of contemporary art in China.

Less than ten years later in the southern city of Hangzhou, a thousand kilometres away from Beijing, Zhang Peili spent three hours smashing and then reassembling a mirror, piece by piece, with a repetitive rhythm and an underlying aesthetic of boredom. The resulting 32 minute video, 30x30, is widely considered as China's first video art work – a critique of the mind-numbing effects of China's mass media industries. A few years later, Wang Gongxin returned from ten years in the United States and completed his now-famous video, *The Sky of Brooklyn to dig a hole in Beijing* (1995) – a work that considers the relationship between the United States and China and his experience in each of these countries. In the minds of many museums and collectors today,

Chinese art of the 1990s is synonymous with kitsch, Cultural Revolution iconography and large-scale paintings and sculpture; however, Zhang and Wang's experiments were going in another direction at the time. Frustrated by the limitations of traditional media and uninterested in the dictates of the art market, they chose methods that would liberate their practice and issues that would challenge their audiences.

Their work had a significant impact on their peers, and many other artists began trialing new approaches.

Indeed, while the Chinese art scene in the 1990s is often characterised as a period of conformity to commercial trends, often limited to political pop and cynical realism, they were also a time of other forms of experimentation and one in which new means of expression were being tested and pioneered. From the early 1990s, collectives such as the Guangzhou-based, Big Tail Elephant Working Group (led in its first decade by Chen Shaoxiong) were using performance, installation and other new media art forms to explore issues of urban development and social change; while The Pond Society, led by Zhang Peili a few years earlier, were experimenting with public art in Hangzhou.

幕Mu:Screen – three generations of Chinese video art provides a historical overview of these practices, including work from 1991 to 2010. It presents eight artists who use video, animation or film – continuously challenging their art through experiments with new modes of expression.

The works in *幕Mu:Screen* range from the personal to the political, interrogating local and global society, the absurdity of ideology, the notion of authority, as well as the artists' own subjectivity. Each work speaks in the distinct language of its creator, both rigorous and humorous, and often modulated with tones of self-derision. We will rediscover an early work of Zhang Peili's, *Water – the standard version from the Dictionary Cihai* (1993), in which a Chinese television newsreader relates the definition of water from the Cihai Dictionary.

Wang Gongxin will receive audiences at the door with his comical, *Always Welcome* (2003); while his poetic installation, *Dinner Table* (2006), will confuse and question definitions of reality.

Chen Shaoxiong displays a series of four, beautiful ink animations:

The Ink City (2005), *The Ink Diary* (2006), *The Ink Diary* (2007) and *The Ink History* (2010). *The Ink History* is experiencing its world premier in *幕Mu:Screen*, and depicts one hundred years of Chinese history through two hundred ink works assembled in a three minute piece.

Yang Fudong, famous for his black and white aesthetic, is represented here with his haunting movie, *Liu Lan* (2003); while Kan Xuan, influenced by years living in the Netherlands perhaps, has a lighter and more minimal style, here represented with the charming tale of a spider and a body in *Looking Looking For ...* (2001).

Ma Qiusa delivers a cruel but beautiful work in *A Beautiful Film* (2007) – a film steeped in anxiety and alienation, concerns about sexuality, and other feelings Ma sees as common sicknesses of her generation.

And last but not least, the incredible animations, *Flowers of Chaos* (2007) by Wu Junyong and *People's Republic of Zoo* (2009) by Sun Xun, create a theatre of the absurd, digging into history, crawling into the oceans and through time to examine the present and past.

These are all works that have pushed the boundaries of contemporary Chinese art, either helping to create new practices in the early 1990s or continuing to challenge these today. Innovating with ink, printing, installation and staging, they offer fresh perspectives and means of expression, speaking with lightness, creativity and boldness.

Marie Terrieux 2010

ARTIST BIOS

WANG GONGXIN (b. 1960) was an early innovator with video art in the 1990s and, along with Zhang Peili, is largely credited as establishing it as a genuine art form in China. His central concerns include the relations and misunderstandings between China and the USA, relations between children and parents, and the boundaries between the real and the unreal.

Wang Gongxin has exhibited extensively internationally: in the New York PS1, Venice Biennale 2001, Rencontres d'Arles International Photo Festival, The Moscow Photo Biennale 2006 and Mori Art Museum Japan.

ZHANG PEILI (b. 1957) is widely considered to be the first to use video in China, and is often referred to as the 'father' of Chinese contemporary video art. He was one of the initiators of The Pond Group in the 1980s in Hangzhou, known for its existential bent and various experimentations and interventions in public life. After practicing painting and installation in his early years, he turned exclusively to video, and for more than twenty years now has been quietly and meticulously creating a huge body of work.

Zhang is currently Dean of the New Media Department of the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. His works feature in many international collections and have been in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Serpentine Gallery London; the Venice Biennale, 1999 and the Biennale of Sydney, 1998.

CHEN SHAOXIONG (b. 1962) is a founding member of The Big Tail Elephant Working Group – a highly influential art collective that was active from 1990 to 1998 in Guangzhou. The group questioned the rapid urbanisation of the country, especially in the south of China.

Through a variety of media, including photography, video, installation, collage and ink painting Chen has created a large body of work that examines China's new cities and also the concept of time. Chen Shaoxiong has exhibited at the Mori Museum, Japan; ICP, New York; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; the Venice Biennale, 2003 and Serpentine Gallery, London.

YANG FUDONG (b. 1971) uses his videos and ironic photographs to depict the radical changes occurring in China's urban environments. He is also one of the few artists to use 35mm black & white film. One of his major films "Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest" started in 2003, is a series of 5 parts depicts the journey and pursuit of liberty of seven young poets and artists, exploring the role of intellectual in contemporary China.

A graduate of the National Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou, Yang Fudong exhibited in the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2007. He also exhibited in Documenta XI, 2002; the Shanghai Biennale, 2002; The Carnegie International, 2005; and the Asia Pacific Triennial, 2006.

KAN XUAN (b. 1972) Kan Xuan's works are characterised by humour, lightness, and grace, alongside a deep sense of critical irony. She has lived and worked extensively in the Netherlands, the influence of which can be felt in her work.

Kan Xuan studied oil painting at the China Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou, graduating in 1997. It was there that she met Zhang Peili and his peers, and began to take an interest in experimentation beyond painting and drawing. In 1998 Kan moved to Beijing, and began to focus on video as her primary medium of expression. Kan Xuan has been exhibited widely on the international art scene, including the Istanbul Biennale, 2007 and Venice Biennale, 2007.

LIST OF WORKS

Chen Shaoxiong
The Ink City, 2005

SD animation, audio
3:00
courtesy of the artist

Chen Shaoxiong
The Ink Diary, 2006

SD animation, audio
3:00
courtesy of the artist

Chen Shaoxiong
The Ink Things, 2007

SD animation, audio
3:00
courtesy of the artist

Chen Shaoxiong
The Ink History, 2010

SD animation, audio
3:00
courtesy of the artist

Kan Xuan
Looking Looking Looking For ... , 2001

SD video, audio
2:42
courtesy of the artist

Ma Qiusha
A Beautiful Film, 2007

2 channel video, audio
10:00
courtesy of Beijing Commune

Sun Xun
People's Republic of Zoo, 2009

SD animation, audio
7:30
courtesy of Shanghart gallery

Wang Gongxin
The Dinner Table, 2006

video installation, wooden table, audio
5:00
courtesy of the Neilson Family, White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Wang Gongxin
Always Welcome, 2003

2 channel video installation, audio
1:16
courtesy of the artist

Wu Junyong
Flowers of Chaos, 2009

SD animation, audio
3:35
courtesy of the artist

Yang Fudong
Liu Lan, 2003

35mm b&w film transferred to dvd, audio
14:00
courtesy of Shanghart gallery

Zhang Peili
Water – Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai, 1992

SD video, audio
9:00
courtesy of the artist

MARIE TERRIEUX is a freelance art consultant with her own company Shuang Culture.

In 2005 she established herself in Beijing and in 2006 began working for Thinking Hands – a pioneer cultural organisation organising the Dashanzi International Art festival at the time.

Between September 2007 and December 2009 Marie was the Artistic Director of ifa gallery in Shanghai, where she curated or co-curated more than 10 exhibitions, including the Gao Brothers Solo Show and A Snapshot of Contemporary Vietnamese Art.

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UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

UTS:GALLERY

Level 4, 702 Harris Street Ultimo
Monday – Friday 12–6pm | 02 9514 1652

www.utsgallery.uts.edu.au

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